

## "Archaeologists Discover Man Whose Tongue Was Replaced by a Stone "

A different take on the same body, prognosis remains poor

This is a reconstruction of a 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE burial from Roman Britain.



(the two images to the left are from the *Archaeologists Discover Man Whose Tongue Was Replaced by a Stone* *Guardian Article*)

He has been buried prone, with a flat stone in his mouth. Therefore, as there was evidence of infection in the facial bones, the archeologists proposed that the man had his tongue amputated, and replaced at the time of burial with a flat stone, as the Romans were known to replace missing body parts at the time of burial. However, no other tongue replacements are known.



Here is what Dr. Mays, the archaeologist studying the find said on the subject:

"There are Germanic law codes which talk about cutting people's tongues out because they spread malicious accusations against other people. We're looking into it at the moment, but I don't know whether there are any Roman laws to that effect. Feedback I've had hasn't indicated that there were ... although that is of course still possible. We don't know much about practices in Roman Britain as opposed to Rome itself."

"What gave us this idea is that there are other burials from Roman Britain where missing body parts in the grave are replaced by objects at the appropriate anatomical location. There are only about 10 of these that we've so far been able to identify. The great majority are decapitations, where you've

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got a stone or a pot placed where the head should be. We thought that, because of this, perhaps a stone could replace the tongue because it's in the front part of the mouth where the tongue ought to be." [...]

"The whole idea of replacing a severed body part with an object is interesting in itself. It could be an attempt to complete an incomplete body. Or it could be an attempt to replace part of a body with something obviously inanimate, like a stone or a pot, to prevent the corpse from being complete."

As this person was buried prone, which is a well known revenant prevention measure, this is very suspicious for an apotropaic burial. However, placing the stones in the mouth of the deceased, though widespread in Europe later, is not known in Roman Britain. Even if this person was a subject to a judicial tongue amputation, this does not preclude an apotropaic burial, as criminals, social outcasts, and those who died an unusual death were considered high risk for becoming revenants, and were more likely to be buried prone.



Furthermore, as the body decays, it is impossible to determine whether a person was interred with or without a tongue, and the evidence of infection in facial bones is not specific for tongue removal.

Excavations of late Roman Empire cemeteries do discover burials featuring prone positions, decapitation with misplaced heads and deviant north-south orientation which are well known apotropaic measures. These burials tend to be located at the periphery of the established cemeteries, and seem to increase in popularity in the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE.

Some have coins placed in their mouths, which is often interpreted as a fee for Charon, ferryman of the dead, and, therefore, these burials are interpreted as pagan. However, these measures persisted in Christian Europe as ways of preventing revenants, for centuries after the fall of Rome. For example, in the image to the left, placing a coin in the mouth of the deceased is seen in late 16<sup>th</sup>- early 17<sup>th</sup> c CE Polish burial. This lady also had a stone placed on her chest, another apotropaic measure.

(the image to the left is from '*Demon Burials*' Discovered in Poland cemetery article)

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